Alec Mitchell

Alexander George Mitchell (1911–1997)

Alexander George Mitchell was born in Kempsey, NSW, on 13 October 1911, and died in Sydney on 19 September 1997. He was educated at Maitland Boys High School, and at the University of Sydney, on a Teachers' College scholarship, graduating with first class honours in English in 1933. The major influence on him at Sydney was E R Holme, who communicated to Mitchell his interest in phonetics and in Australian English. (Holme's work on the Australian vocabulary was incorporated in Webster's *New International Dictionary* in 1936, and Mitchell would contribute a supplement of Australian and New Zealand words to Chambers' *Shorter English Dictionary* in 1952.) Holme appointed Mitchell and E J Dobson to the staff as part-time tutors in 1934, and Mitchell went on to complete his MA on 'The Scop and his Art' with first class honours and the University Medal in 1936.

He then studied for a PhD at University College, London, on *Piers Plowman*. His mentor was now R W Chambers, who came to epitomise for Mitchell the ideal of exact and modest scholarship. He was apt to quote the dictum of Chambers, when confronted by some false scholarly claim (on the genealogy of sprung rhythm, perhaps) that it was 'not according to knowledge' (usually said twice). He also studied phonetics under Daniel Jones, who examined Mitchell on the glottal stop by asking him to demonstrate it in the sentence 'What a lot of little bottles'.

As a postgraduate in London Mitchell had the support of his wife Una, with whom he had grown up in Morpeth and whom he had married in August 1937. This support was to be lifelong. When some years later I was about to set off with my wife for postgraduate study overseas, I remember Una's recommendation of steamed puddings in the English winter. (To her and to everyone else he answered to 'Alec', but always signed himself 'Alex'.)

Completing his PhD in 1939, Mitchell returned to Sydney, where he was appointed Lecturer in 1941 and promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1945 . In 1947 he was appointed to the McCaughey Chair of Early English Literature and Language. Joining the staff in 1950, I owe to him and to Wesley Milgate a civilised induction into University life. In the absence of a staff common room, Mitchell gave up his office to morning and afternoon tea every day. He followed the example of Holme in looking after junior members of staff, fighting their battles when they might be at a disadvantage, and exerting himself for their advancement. He said that as a professor or head of department he never gave anyone an instruction in his life. If I (as a senior lecturer) ever disagreed with him about the course to be followed, and he

reached the stage of saying 'I would prefer that ...', I immediately acquiesced. One sought to be as civilised as he was.

Mitchell's total personality is not easy to convey. I recall an episode when he was Chief Examiner for Leaving Certificate English. Each paper then had an Assessor, usually an inspector of schools, who had to certify that certain requirements had been met, and who could create difficulties if he assumed that he had some power of veto over the paper. Mitchell would go through the list of criteria which defined the Assessor's role (Is the paper fairly based on the syllabus? Is it within the understanding of the candidates?) and expected the certificate to be signed if the answers were affirmative. If an impasse was reached, the issue (to the Assessor's alarm) could be referred to the Chairman of the Board of Secondary School Studies. I was in Mitchell's room one day when there was a knock at the door, and the Assessor for that year put his head around it, and said 'Should I throw my hat in first?' Mitchell was immediately on his feet with a beaming smile, ushering Hedley Yelland to a seat, and I left them to sort it out amicably. I thought this indicated three things about Mitchell: that there was a degree of metal in his nature (he was going to hold to his principle), that he responded at once to any sign of good will, and that he was the diplomat, always in search of harmony.

Mitchell's first publication in Australian English was *The Pronunciation of English in Australia*, issued as a pamphlet by the English Association in 1940, and in a much enlarged form by Angus and Robertson in 1946. This was followed by *A Guide to the Pronunciation of Australian Place Names*, issued by the ABC Standing Committee on Spoken English under Mitchell's chairmanship in 1957, and by *The Speech of Australian Adolescents* (with Arthur Delbridge) in 1965. Two books of more general reference were *The Use of English* (1954) and *Spoken English* (1958). Mitchell was a foundation member of the Australian Humanities Research Council in 1956, and its Chairman for 1959–62. The subject of his Annual Lecture in 1960 was *The Australian Accent*.

Mitchell's long-term project over these years was an edition of the 'C' text of *Piers Plowman* for the Athlone Press. He was honoured in 1956 by the invitation to deliver the third Chambers Memorial Lecture, and *Lady Meed and the Art of 'Piers Plowman'* is a testimony to his literary perceptiveness and to his insight into the poem. He invited G H Russell to collaborate with him in the edition of the 'C' text, with Russell eventually taking the larger share and bringing the work to a conclusion in 1997.

To Mitchell's colleagues at Sydney it seemed part of the order of things that he should combine his scholarly pursuits with the presidency of the

University Union and of the Staff Association, with a campaign to reform the matriculation requirements, with the chairmanship of the Professorial Board, and a routine clinic at the Children's Hospital for children with speech impediments. In this he was following the tradition of service to the University as a whole laid down by E R Holme, and by such others of his generation as F A Todd and G F Sutherland. Its consequence was that Mitchell had a range of friends and associates across all of the faculties in the University, so that for him the concept of *universitas*, a community of scholars, was not an abstraction but something he participated in every day.

I believe that Mitchell took this sense of the University with him as foundation Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie in 1965. Although he had felt a wrench on the transition from 'scholarship' to 'administration' on becoming Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Sydney in 1961, he entered into his new role with great zest, giving his personal attention to the first appointments, and at a time when the Macquarie campus was occupied by a few cottages, creating a sense of community which those involved in those early days seem never to have lost. The transformation of the institution by the time Mitchell retired in 1975 is a matter of record, though less may be known of the association which for him continued for almost twenty-five years after, so that he was still attending graduation ceremonies in the year of his death.

His notion of the community of scholarship persisted in the research project on which Mitchell was engaged in his retirement, an account of the history of Australian English as it unfolded. For this he adopted a multi-disciplinary approach. He sought guidance from his colleagues in historical geography, demography, educational history, economic history, transport and communication and related fields, to trace the forces at play in the evolution of Australian English, and he gave a progress report in his lecture of 1993, *The Story of Australian English*, which was followed by seminars on individual topics. The manuscript on which he was still working at his death, now being prepared for publication, will give his notion of *universitas* a personal embodiment.

G A Wilkes